

## NINIAN SMART

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# INTERPRETATION AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

*Summary.* Professor R. C. Zaehner's distinction between panenhenic, monistic and theistic mysticism will be examined. It will be argued that there is no necessary reason to suppose that the latter two types involve different sorts of experience: the difference lies rather in the way the experience is interpreted. Likewise it will be argued that the Theravādin experience of nirvana, which is interpreted neither in a monistic nor in a theistic sense, may well be identical substantially with the foregoing two types. All this raises important methodological problems, in relation to the contrast between experience and interpretation. The fact that mysticism is substantially the same in different cultures and religions does not, however, entail that there is a 'perennial philosophy' common to mystics. Their doctrines are determined partly by factors other than mystical experience itself.

### I. THE MEANING OF 'MYSTICISM'

Unfortunately the term 'mysticism' and its relations ('mystical', etc.) are used by different people in different senses. For the purposes of this article I shall treat mysticism as primarily consisting in an interior or introvertive quest, culminating in certain interior experiences which are not described in terms of sense-experience or of mental images, etc. But such an account needs supplementation in two directions: first, examples of people who typify the mystical life should be given, and second, mysticism should be distinguished from that which is *not* (on this usage) mysticism.

First, then, I would propose that the following folk typify the mystical life: St John of the Cross, Tauler, Eckhart, al-Hallāj, Shankara, the Buddha, Lao-Tzu (if he existed!), and many yogis.

Secondly, mysticism is *not* prophetism, and can be distinguished from devotionism or *bhakti* religion (though mysticism often intermingles with these forms of religious life and experience). I would propose that the following are *not* mystics in the relevant sense in which the Buddha and the others *are* mystics: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Muhammad, Rāmānuja, Nichiren and Calvin.

Needless, perhaps, to say, such expressions as the 'mystical body of Christ' have no necessary connection with mysticism in the proposed sense. It is unfortunate that a word which etymologically means sacramentalism has come to be used in a different sense. Since, however, 'mysticism' now is most

often used to refer to the mode of life and experience typified by men like St John of the Cross and Shankara, I shall use the term, though 'contemplation' and 'contemplative' can be less misleading.

Thus 'mysticism' will here be used to refer to the contemplative life and experience, as distinguished from prophetism, devotionism and sacramentalism (though we must keep in mind the fact mentioned above—that prophetic and sacramental religion are often interwoven with that of mysticism).

## II. PROFESSOR ZAEHNER'S ANALYSIS AND THEORY

In a number of works, Professor Zaehner has distinguished between three categories of mystical experience:

- (1) Panenhenic or nature mysticism (as exemplified by Rimbaud, Jefferies and others).
- (2) Monistic mysticism (as found in Advaita, Sāṅkhya-Yoga, etc.).
- (3) Theistic mysticism (as in the Christian tradition, the *Gītā*, etc.).

His distinction between (1) and the other two is correct and valuable. The sense of rapport with nature often comes to people in a striking and intimate way; but it is to be contrasted with the interior experience in which, as it were, a man plumbs the depths of his own soul. It is probable that *Zen satori* is to be equated with panenhenic experience, though *Zen* also makes use of the general pattern of Buddhist yoga which elsewhere culminates in an interior rather than a panenhenic type of experience.

But is Zaehner's distinction between (2) and (3) a valid one? He criticises those who believe that mysticism is everywhere the same—a belief sometimes held in conjunction with the neo-Vedantin thesis that behind the various forms of religion there is a higher truth realisable in contemplative experience and best expressed through the doctrine of a universal Self (or *Ātman*). On Zaehner's view, monistic mysticism is 'realising the eternal oneness of one's own soul' as contrasted with the 'mysticism of the love of God'.<sup>1</sup> The latter attainment is typical of Christian, Muslim and other theistic contemplation.

Zaehner believes in an eternal soul, as well as in God, and is thus able to claim that there is a real entity which the monistic mystic experiences, even if it is not the highest entity (which is God). In addition, he holds, or has held, that monistic mysticism can be explained through the doctrine of the Fall. Thus he is not merely concerned to analyse mysticism, but also to explain it through a (theological) theory. He writes as follows:

Assuming, as we are still encouraged to do, that man developed physically from the higher apes, we must interpret the creation of Adam as an original infusion of

<sup>1</sup> *At Sundry Times*, p. 132.

the divine essence into what had previously been an anthropoid ape. Adam, then, would represent the union of the orders of nature and grace, the order of coming to be and passing away which is created from nothing by God, and the infused spirit of God. Adam, after he sinned, brought bodily death into the world, but did not and could not destroy his soul, because the soul was infused into him from God and therefore was itself divine. Though Adam may have repented, he was no longer able to take the supreme step of offering himself back completely and entirely to God, because he had lost contact with his source and could no longer find it again. Thus, tradition has it, at death his soul departed to Limbo, where, like all disinterested Yogins who have sought to separate their immortal souls from all that is transient and ungodlike, yet who cannot acknowledge God, it enjoyed the highest natural bliss, the soul's contemplation of itself as it issued from the hand of God and of all created things as they are in the sight of God . . . The proof, it seems to me, that I am not talking pure nonsense is in the complete difference of approach which separates the theistic from the monistic mystic. The latter achieves liberation entirely by his own efforts since there is no God apart from himself to help him or with whom he can be united. In the case of the theistic mystic, on the other hand, it is always God who takes the first step, and it is God who works in the soul and makes it fit for union.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Zaehner not only distinguishes types of mysticism: he links his distinction to a theology of the Fall. Though it is not the main concern of this article to consider this theological theory, it may be useful to go into certain criticisms which can be levelled at it, since some of them are relevant to Zaehner's doctrine of types of mysticism.

### III. THE THEORY EXAMINED

In linking his analysis of mysticism to a theory about the special creation of Adam and his Fall, Zaehner weakens his position, since his interpretation of the Adam story may be radically questioned. The doubts and objections which arise are, briefly, as follows:

(a) The Biblical narrative, which is the principal basis for people's belief in the existence of Adam, says nothing about anthropoid apes and nothing about an eternal soul as such. Still less does it make Adam out to be like a Yogin.

(b) Adam cannot have brought bodily death into the world, since the apes were not immortal. But let us assume that Adam was different, and was initially immortal, because of the divine essence infused into him. How does this imply that there was no bodily death for him? Does it mean that God did something to the bodily side of Adam, making the flesh and bones which Adam inherited from the apes into something mysteriously imperishable? It is not a likely story.

(c) Not all Christians would accept the theory of a substantial eternal soul. But in any case, it does not follow that this is what the monistic mystic realises in his inner contemplative experience. The Advaitin would believe that

<sup>1</sup> *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, pp. 191–2.

he has realised the oneness of the Ātman with the divine being; while the adherent of Yoga would not. This is a big difference of interpretation, and if we were to take it at its face value we might be inclined to say that the Advaitin and the Yogin have attained different states. But do we have to take their claims at their face value? This raises important methodological issues.

Does the Advaitin make his claim simply on the basis of an inner contemplative experience? It is not so. The concept of Brahman as a divine Reality ultimately derives from an extension of the idea of the sacred Power implicit in pre-Upanishadic sacrificial ritual. The famous identification of Ātman with Brahman involves bringing together different strands of religious thought and life. It is not something yielded by contemplative experience alone, even though the latter is highly relevant to it.

Likewise, the theistic mystic, in thinking that he has attained a kind of union with God must already have the concept of God—as a personal Being, creator of the world, author of revelation, etc. His description of his experience, where this includes mention of God, is thus not derived *simply* from the nature of that experience. The mystic does not know that God is creator from a mere inspection of an interior state; rather he relates that inner state to beliefs which he already has.

Zaehner's theory, too, obviously includes data derived from sources other than those contained in mystical literature. In interpreting what happens to the Yogin he draws on certain elements in the Christian tradition. It therefore seems that the truth of his theory depends partly on the truth of Christianity (at least, negatively: if Christianity were false, Zaehner's theory would be false, though the falsity of his theory is compatible with the truth of Christianity, since the latter is not necessarily committed to beliefs about anthropoid apes and the like).

These points indicate that we must examine in more detail the methodology of the evaluation and interpretation of mystical experience.

#### IV. EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATION (AUTO- AND HETERO-)

That some distinction must be made between experience and interpretation is clear. For it is generally recognised, and certainly by Zaehner, that there are types of mystical experience cutting across different religions and theologies. That is to say, it is recognised that a mystic of one religion and some mystic of another faith can have what is substantially a similar experience. Thus as we have noted, both Christian and Muslim mystics come under Zaehner's category of theistic mysticism; while, for him, Advaitin and Yogin mysticism belong to the monistic category. But the interpretations within a type differ. We have seen a large doctrinal distinction between Avaita and Yoga. The latter believes in a plurality of eternal *purushas*, not in a single Ātman.

Consequently its account of liberation, and therefore of contemplative experience, differs from that of Advaita. Thus on Zaehner's own thesis it becomes very necessary to distinguish between experience and interpretation, when two experiences belong to the same class but have rather different modes of interpretation.

Nevertheless, the distinction between experience and interpretation is not clear-cut. The reason for this is that the concepts used in describing and explaining an experience vary in their degree of ramification. That is to say, where a concept occurs as part of a doctrinal scheme it gains its meaning in part from a range of doctrinal statements taken to be true. For example, the term 'God' in the Christian context gains part at least of its characteristic meaning from such doctrinal statements as: 'God created the universe', 'Jesus Christ is God', 'God has acted in history', etc.

Thus when Suso writes 'In this merging of itself in God the spirit passes away', he is describing a contemplative experience by means of the highly ramified concept *God*, the less ramified concept *spirit* and the still less ramified concept *pass away*. In order to understand the statement it is necessary to bear in mind the doctrinal ramifications contained in it. Thus it follows, for Suso as a Christian, that in this merging of itself in the Creator of the universe, the spirit passes away; and so on.

By contrast, some descriptions of mystical experience do not involve such wide ramifications. For instance 'When the spirit by the loss of its self-consciousness has in very truth established its abode in this glorious and dazzling obscurity'—here something of the nature of the experience is conveyed without any doctrine's being presupposed as true (except in so far as the concept *spirit* may involve some belief in an eternal element within man). This, then, is a relatively unramified description. Thus descriptions of mystical experience range from the highly ramified to those which have a very low degree of ramification.<sup>1</sup>

It is to be noted that ramifications may enter into the descriptions either because of the intentional nature of the experience or through reflection upon it. Thus a person brought up in a Christian environment and strenuously practising the Christian life may have a contemplative experience which he sees *as* a union with God. The whole spirit of his interior quest will affect the way he sees his experience; or, to put it another way, the whole spirit of his quest will enter into the experience. On the other hand, a person might only come to see the experience in this way after the event, as it were: upon reflection he interprets his experience in theological categories.

In all descriptions of mystical experience, then, we ought to be on the lookout for ramifications. Their degree can be crudely estimated by asking:

<sup>1</sup> See my 'Mystical Experience', in *Sophia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (April, 1962), pp. 19 ff., discussing the distinction between experience and interpretation as propounded by W. T. Stace in *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 37.

How many propositions are presupposed as true by the description in question?

It would also seem to follow, if we bear in mind the notion of degrees of ramification, that the higher the degree of ramification, the less is the description guaranteed by the experience itself. For where there is a high degree of ramification, some statements will be presupposed which have to be verified in other ways than by immediate mystical experience. Thus a mystic who claims to become united with Christ presupposes that the historical Jesus is the Christ; and the historicity of Jesus is guaranteed by the written records, not by an interior experience. Again, where contemplation is regarded as a means of liberation from rebirth, the description of the mystical experience may involve reference to this doctrine (thus the concept *nirvana* presupposes the truth of the rebirth doctrine). To say that someone has in this life attained the peace and insight of nirvana is also to claim that he will not be reborn. But the truth of rebirth is not discovered through mystical experience as such. It is true that the Buddhist yogin may claim supernormal knowledge of previous lives: but this is in the nature of memory, if anything, and is to be distinguished from the formless, imageless inner experience which accrues upon the practice of *jhāna*. Also, Buddhists appeal to other empirical and philosophical evidence in support of the claim that the rebirth doctrine is true.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of degrees of ramification may help to clarify the distinction between experience and interpretation. But a further methodological point is also important. Descriptions, etc., of religious experience may be made from various points of view. There is the description given by the man himself, in terms of his own tradition. There is the description which others of his own tradition may give. Also, men of another tradition may describe his experience in terms of *their* tradition or standpoint. Thus if a Christian says that the Buddha's Enlightenment-experience involved some kind of interior vision of God, he is describing the experience from his own point of view and not from that of the Buddha. We crucially, then, should distinguish between a mystic's interpretation of his own experience and the interpretation which may be placed upon it from a different point of view. In other words, we must distinguish between what may be called *auto-interpretation* and *hetero-interpretation*.<sup>2</sup>

The difference between the auto-interpretation of an experience and the hetero-interpretation of it will depend on, first, the degree of ramification involved and, secondly, the difference between the presupposed truths incorporated in the ramification. For example, the Christian evaluation of the Buddha's Enlightenment-experience posited above uses the concept *God* in the Christian sense. The Buddhist description on the other hand does not. Thus the Christian hetero-interpretation presupposes such propositions as

<sup>1</sup> See my *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*, ch. xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 37.

that God created the world, God was in Christ, etc., and these propositions are not accepted in the Buddhist auto-interpretation. By contrast the Jewish and Christian interpretations of Isaiah's experience in the Temple overlap in great measure. This is because the beliefs presupposed coincide over a reasonably wide range.

These methodological observations, though rather obvious, need stating because they are too commonly neglected.

We may conclude so far, then, that a description of a mystical experience can fall under one of the following heads:

- (a) Auto-interpretation with a low degree of ramification.
- (b) Hetero-interpretation with a low degree of ramification.
- (c) Auto-interpretation with a high degree of ramification.
- (d) Hetero-interpretation with a high degree of ramification.

These can conveniently be called for short:

- (a) Low auto-interpretation.
- (b) Low hetero-interpretation.
- (c) High auto-interpretation.
- (d) High hetero-interpretation.

We may note that a high hetero-interpretation of experience (*e*) will usually imply the falsity or inadequacy of a high auto-interpretation of (*e*), and conversely. It would therefore seem to be a sound principle to try to seek a low hetero-interpretation coinciding well with a low auto-interpretation. In this way an agreed phenomenological account of (*e*) will be arrived at, and this will facilitate the attempt to distinguish experience from interpretation. But since (*e*) will often be affected by its high auto-interpretation, it is also important to understand this high auto-interpretation, without obscuring it by means of a high hetero-interpretation.

I shall argue that Zaehner's distinction between monistic and theistic mysticism partly depends on his own high hetero-interpretation, and partly on his not distinguishing between high and low auto-interpretation.

#### V. ZAEHNER'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN MONISTIC AND THEISTIC MYSTICISM CRITICISED

A difficulty about Zaehner's classification arises once we examine Buddhism. It is undoubtedly the case that Buddhism—and very clearly in Theravāda Buddhism—centres on mystical experience. The Eightfold Path incorporates and culminates in a form of yoga which may bring the peace and insight of nirvana to the saint. Crucial in this yoga is the practice of the *jhānas* or stages of meditation. It is thus necessary for any account of mysticism to take Buddhist experience and tradition seriously. But regrettably (from Zaehner's point of view) Buddhism denies the soul or eternal self. Zaehner, in order to

fit Buddhism into the monistic pigeon-hole, denies this denial, and ascribes an *ātman* doctrine to the Buddha.

This will not do, for a number of reasons.<sup>1</sup>

First, even if (incredibly) the Buddha did teach an *ātman* doctrine, we still have to reckon with the Buddhists. The phenomenon of Buddhist mysticism, not involving an *ātman*-type auto-interpretation, remains; and it is both widespread and important in the fabric of man's religious experience.

Secondly, it is asking too much to make us believe that a doctrine which has been eschewed by nearly all Buddhists (with the possible exception of the *pudgalavādins*, who significantly did not dare to use the term *ātman*, even though their Buddhist opponents castigated them for wanting to introduce the idea) was explicitly taught by the Buddha. The *anattā* teaching is about the strongest bit of the earliest tradition which we possess.

Thirdly, it is easy enough to play around with the texts by translating *attā* with a capital, as 'Self'. Thus Zaehner translates *attagarahī*<sup>2</sup> as 'that the Self would blame', and so on. He refers us to *Dhammapada* 165 to show that evil is done by the empirical ego; so that in vs. 157, when we are enjoined to treat the self as dear, it must be the eternal Self which is being referred to. But consider the former passage. It reads: 'By oneself is evil done; one is defiled by oneself. . . by oneself one is made pure; the pure and the impure stand and fall by themselves; no one can purify another.' Does one really want to translate: 'By oneself is evil done; . . . by one's Self is one made pure'? The point could have been expressed more clearly if the author had wanted to say *this*. The whole purport of such passages is that one should be self-reliant and responsible (and I do not mean Self-reliant!). The fact is that the word *attā* is very common, and has an ordinary usage. It is a gross strain on the texts to read in the meaning ascribed to them by Zaehner.

Fourth, Zaehner thinks his case is confirmed by the passages 'illustrating what the Self is not'<sup>3</sup>—it is not the body, feelings, dispositions, etc. But these passages in no way help Zaehner. Their import is clearly explained in the famous passage of the *Milindapañha* (40–45), where a Humean analysis of the individual is given. The Buddha himself, furthermore, is reported as having asserted that though it is wrong to identify the self with the body, it is better for the uninstructed man to make this mistake than to commit the opposite error of believing in an eternal soul.<sup>4</sup>

For these and other reasons, Zaehner's interpretation cannot seriously be defended. But embarrassing consequences flow from this conclusion. It means that a main form of mysticism does not involve a monistic auto-interpretation.

<sup>1</sup> A fuller criticism is to be found in my *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*, pp. 211 ff. Zaehner's account of Buddhism is discoverable in his *At Sundry Times* (see, e.g., his argument on p. 98).

<sup>2</sup> *Sutta-nipata* 788: see *At Sundry Times*, pp. 98–101.

<sup>3</sup> *At Sundry Times*, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> *Samyutta-nikāya*, ii, 95.



Nevertheless, Zaehner could still argue as follows. Admittedly a monistic auto-interpretation is not present among Buddhist contemplatives: but it is still reasonable to hetero-interpret their attainment in a monistic fashion. We can still say (can we not?) that what the Buddhist *really* achieves in and through contemplation is the isolation of his eternal soul.

Such a defence, however, implies that there can be a misunderstanding on the part of a mystic as to what it is he is attaining. It implies that auto-interpretations can be widely mistaken, in so far as they are ramified.

Likewise, since Zaehner classifies both Yoga and Advaita together as monistic, and since their doctrinal auto-interpretations differ very widely, within the Hindu context it has to be admitted that wrong auto-interpretation can occur.

Let us bring this out more explicitly. According to Zaehner, Buddhist, Yoga and Advaitin mystics belong together, and fit in the same monistic category, and yet the following three doctrines of liberation are propounded by them:

(1) That there are no eternal selves, but only impermanent individuals who are, however, capable of liberation, through attaining nirvana in this life, in which case they will no more be reborn.

(2) That there is an infinite number of eternal selves, who through Yoga can attain isolation or liberation, a state in which the soul exists by itself, no longer implicated in nature and in the round of rebirth.

(3) That there is but one Self, which individuals can realise, and which is identical with Brahman as the ground of being (which at a lower level of truth manifests itself as a personal Lord and Creator)—such a realisation bringing about a cessation of the otherwise continuously reborn individual.

Now these are obviously very different doctrines. Why should the crucial difference lie between them and theism? Is not the difference between (2) and (3) equally striking? If the monistic category includes heterogeneous high auto-interpretations, there is no guarantee that we should not place *all* mystics, including theists, in the same category; and explain their difference not in terms of radically different experiences, but in terms of varied auto-interpretation. The gaps within the monistic category are big enough for it not to seem implausible to count the gap between monism and theism as no wider.

Admit that high auto-interpretations can be mistaken, and there is no great reason to isolate theistic mysticism as belonging to a separate category.

If I am right in proposing this on methodological grounds, we can go on to explain the difference between Yoga (say) and theism by reference to what goes on outside the context of the mystical life. The devotional and prophetic experiences of a personal God—prophetism and *bhakti* religion—these help to explain why the theist sees his contemplative experience in a

special way. He already considers that there is evidence of a personal Lord and Creator: in the silent brightness of inner contemplative ecstasy it is natural (or supernatural) to identify what is found within with the Lord who is worshipped without.<sup>1</sup> *A priori*, then, there is no special call to assign theistic mysticism to a special pigeon-hole. Of course, there are theological motives for trying to do this. It avoids some ticklish questions, and it suggests that there is something very special about theistic mysticism. It is a covert means of preaching theism. Now doubtless theism should be preached; but *fairly*. Methodologically, the assignment of theism to a special pigeon-hole is suspect. The arguments are more complex and difficult than we think.

But it may be replied to all this that the discussion has been largely *a priori*. Do we not have to look at the actual words of theistic mystics? Of course. I shall, however, content myself with examining some passages which Zaehner quotes in favour of his own position.

#### VI. SOME PASSAGES FROM THEISTIC MYSTICS EXAMINED

An important part of Zaehner's argument rests on a couple of passages from Ruysbroeck. I quote from these.

Now observe that whenever man is empty and undistracted in his senses by images, and free and unoccupied in his highest powers, he attains rest by purely natural means. And all men can find and possess this rest in themselves by their mere nature, without the grace of God, if they are able to empty themselves of sensual images and of all action.<sup>2</sup>

Zaehner comments that Ruysbroeck here has in effect described (Advaita) Vedāntin mysticism. Talking of men who have attained this 'natural rest', Ruysbroeck goes on:

Through the natural rest, which they feel and have in themselves in emptiness, they maintain that they are free, and united with God without mean, and that they are advanced beyond all the exercises of the Holy Church, and beyond the commandments of God, and beyond the law, and beyond all the virtuous works which one can in any way practise.<sup>3</sup>

Now it will be noted that Ruysbroeck's criticism chiefly rests on moral grounds. He condemns quietists for arrogance, complacency and ethical sterility. They do not properly connect their inner experience with the God taught by the Church, who makes demands upon men, and who wishes that they may love him. But the ordinances and teachings of the Church do not spring from mystical experience: they have other sources. And moral insights are not simply derived from contemplation. In other words, the criteria for judging mystical experience are partly exterior to the contemplative life.

<sup>1</sup> See *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*, ch. x, where an analysis along these lines is worked out in some detail.

<sup>2</sup> *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 171.

Thus, even given that Ruysbroeck is a good guide in these matters (and this need not be so), we might still say: the trouble with 'monistic' quietists is a failure in their auto-interpretation of their experience. They do not really see the God of the Bible and of the Church there. But this does not at all entail that, given a low interpretation (i.e. a relatively unramified account) of their experiences, these experiences differ radically in character from those of theistic mystics. In short, these Ruysbroeck passages are quite compatible with my thesis, and thus do not strongly support the Zaehner analysis.

Quietists, for Ruysbroeck, are not sufficiently aware of the working of God's grace. But the doctrine of grace (and by contrast, nature) is a theological account of God's activity. A person could have a genuine mystical experience, but be wrong in not ascribing it to God's grace. Ruysbroeck's high hetero-interpretation of monistic quietism conflicts with the latter's high auto-interpretation. But the experiences for all that could belong to the same type.

Zaehner also makes use of a very interesting passage from al-Ghazālī, part of which reads as follows:

The mystics, after their ascent to the heavens of Reality, agree that they saw nothing in existence except God the One. Some of them attained this state through discursive reasoning, others reached it by savouring and experiencing it. From these all plurality entirely fell away. They were drowned in pure solitude: their reason was lost in it, and they became as if dazed in it. They no longer had the capacity to recollect aught but God, nor could they in any wise remember themselves. Nothing was left to them but God. They became drunk with a drunkenness in which their reason collapsed. One of them said, 'I am God (the Truth)'. Another said, 'Glory be to me. How great is my glory', while another said, 'Within my robe is naught but God'. But the words of lovers when in a state of drunkenness must be hidden away and not broadcast. However, when their drunkenness abates and the sovereignty of their reason is restored,—and reason is God's scale upon earth,—they know that this was not actual identity. . . . For it is not impossible that a man should be confronted by a mirror and should look into it, and not see the mirror at all, and that he should think that the form he saw in the mirror was the form of the mirror itself and identical with it. . . .<sup>1</sup>

What Ghazālī is saying here—to translate into my own jargon—is that the mystic's auto-interpretation of his experience as involving actual identity with God is mistaken, and that the correct interpretation must say that there is some distinction between the soul and God. In the passage quoted he goes on to explain how the mystic, in his self-naughting, is not conscious of himself (or even of his own unconsciousness of himself), and this is a main reason for the language of identity.

This seems to me a clear indication that the monistic and theistic experiences are essentially similar; and that it is the correct *interpretation* of them which is at issue. The theist must maintain, in order to make sense of worship and devotion, that there is a distinction between the human individual and God.

<sup>1</sup> *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*. pp. 157–8.

The non-theist, not being so much concerned with devotion (though he may allow a place for it at the popular level), can more happily speak of identity with ultimate Reality, or can even dispense (as in Yoga and Theravada Buddhism) with such a concept of the Absolute. Thus the question of what is the best hetero- and auto-interpretation of mystical experience turns on whether devotion and worship are important. Or more generally: the question of interpretation is the same as the question of God. One cannot answer this by reference to auto-interpretations of mystical experience alone; for these auto-interpretations conflict, and they have ramifications extending far beyond the sphere of such experience itself.

This is why my thesis, that maybe there is no essential distinction between what Zaehner has called monistic and theistic mysticism, does not at all entail that proponents of neo-Vedāntin views of a 'perennial philosophy', involving a doctrine of the Absolute Self,<sup>1</sup> are right. The thesis 'All introvertive mysticism is, as experience, essentially the same' does not entail any doctrine. Truth of doctrine depends on evidence other than mysticism, and this is true even of the doctrine of the Absolute Self.

I have tried to argue that the interpretation of mystical experience depends at least in part on evidence, etc., not given in the experience itself; and that therefore there is always a question about the degree to which non-experimental data are incorporated into ramified descriptions of mystical experience. I can best illustrate this, finally, with a passage written by Zaehner himself:

We have already said that when the mystic claims attributes that are necessarily divine and demonstrably not human,—such as omnipotence and omniscience,—it is fairly clear that he is not enjoying union with God, but rather some sort of natural mystical experience. Apart from this important consideration it would seem that the mystic who is genuinely inspired by the divine love, will show this to the world by the holiness of his life and by an abiding humility in face of the immense favours bestowed which he always will see to be God's doing, not his own. Only such criteria can enable us to distinguish between the genuine state of union with God and the 'natural' or rather 'praeternatural' phenomena we have been discussing.<sup>2</sup>

The two criteria here mentioned can be called respectively the theological and the moral. The theological criterion shows, or is claimed to show, that the mystic cannot have enjoyed real union with God because he makes false theological claims (omniscience, etc.) on his own behalf. The moral criterion can show that a mystic has not enjoyed real union with God because his life is not holy, or not humble. Some comments are in order.

First, *both criteria are indirect*. If they are, as Zaehner here says, the *only* criteria that distinguish genuine union with God from something else, then *one cannot establish this latter discrimination on the basis of a phenomenological account*

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, who comes to this conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 193.

of the experience itself, but rather on the basis of the verbal and other behaviour of the contemplative. This supports my thesis that phenomenologically there is no need to distinguish between monistic and theistic mystical experience (auto-interpretations apart).

Secondly, the first criterion depends on the truth of theism. This is why the interpretation and evaluation of mystical experience from a doctrinal point of view cannot be separated from the general question of the truth of theism. The theological criterion could not work for a Vedāntin.

Thirdly, to some extent the same is true of the moral criterion. For humility is a virtue for the theist, who sees the wonder and holiness of the divine Being; but need not be a virtue for the non-theist. In so far as moral ideas depend on theology (and they do in part), one cannot really separate the moral from the theological criterion.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

The above arguments by themselves do not establish the truth of my thesis that monistic and theistic contemplative experiences are (except in so far as they are affected by auto-interpretations) essentially the same: but I hope that they are sufficient to cast doubt on the Zaehner analysis.

Mysticism is not the same as prophetism and *bhakti* religion; but it may gain its auto-interpretations from these latter types of religion. But there is no need to take all interpretations as phenomenological descriptions; and this is the main point of this paper. To put the possibility which I am canvassing in a simple form, it can be reduced to the following theses.

- (1) Phenomenologically, mysticism is everywhere the same.
- (2) Different flavours, however, accrue to the experiences of mystics because of their ways of life and modes of auto-interpretation.
- (3) The truth of interpretation depends in large measure on factors extrinsic to the mystical experience itself.

Thus, the question of whether mysticism is a valid means of knowledge concerning the Transcendent is only part of a much wider set of theological questions.

Finally, let me express my debt to Zaehner's learning and fertility of ideas. If I have criticised a main thesis of his, it is because it is itself an important contribution to the discussion of mysticism. In my view, his analysis is wrong; but interestingly false propositions are worth far more than a whole lot of boringly true ones.